



THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

The Employee Assistance Program to help you manage your most valuable resource— Employees

Call EAS: Olympia (360) 753-3260 Seattle (206) 281-6315 Spokane (509) 482-3686

Website: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. During a recent meeting, we were reminded that EAS is not a disciplinary program. This is a bit confusing – can you clarify?

A. EAS, your employee assistance program, is sometimes misperceived as aligned with an agency's disciplinary process. One reason for this is that a referral to EAS may be appropriately made during any stage of the corrective action or disciplinary process. A supervisor referral that is presented as a positive opportunity for an employee to obtain help for a personal problem that may be contributing to a performance problem yields more favorable results. If a supervisor makes a referral and acts as though it is a consequence of unsatisfactory performance, the process can feel punitive to an employee, which can result in poor cooperation with the EA Professional. Negative perceptions about the EAP, as a result, may be shared with coworkers and can reduce the EAP's use and value to your organization.

■ Q. My employee complains about chronic pain from a medical condition that affects his hip. He sees a doctor, and his work is satisfactory. Should I recommend the EAP or make a supervisor referral? Is chronic pain an issue you would address?

A. If your employee's performance is satisfactory there is no need to make a formal supervisor referral. Don't be surprised, however, if his performance improves with better pain management. Suggest he take advantage of the EAP through a self-referral. The Journal of the American Medical Association (November 2003) recently reported on research that measured lost productivity in the workplace resulting from pain conditions. The study included a random sample of nearly 30,000 employees. Thirteen percent of the workforce experienced a loss in productive time because of a common pain condition. The most common pain conditions experienced by employees are headaches, followed by back pain, arthritis, and other musculoskeletal pain. Treatment of chronic pain is a specialized area of practice for medical doctors and many mental health professionals. Your EA Professional can make an appropriate referral.

■ Q. My employee has always avoided air travel, yet it is essential to her job. I've avoided confronting her, and have sent others in her place. But I can't do it anymore. I need to make an EAP referral, but I don't want to accuse her of fear of flying. What should I do?

A. If you understand the eventual outcome of not confronting your employee and not making a supervisor referral, this will help you take action. For example, will you have to take disciplinary action if she does not participate in business travel? What consequences do you personally face from superiors if you cannot successfully intervene with her performance issue? Could it be argued that you let your employee avoid business travel for so long that an "implied agreement" altered the essential functions of her job? You can avoid discussing her fear of flying. From your perspective, the issue is her inability or unwillingness to comply with all the essential functions of her job. You may need to make a firm offer: Take required business trips and if needed use the EAP to help you, or accept the organization's response to the continuing problem. Be clear about what the response or consequences might be. Predictably, your employee will visit the EAP. Once she does, a professional will refer her to help that will address her fear of flying.

■ Q. How can I keep my employees excited about their jobs and reduce boredom? I don't have a way to financially reward employees for good work, but perhaps there are other ways I can keep them feeling good about what they do.

A. Perhaps no task is more important than helping your employees stay excited about their jobs. Accomplish this task by paying attention to what your employees are doing. You will discover what turns them on and be able to give them more of what they want. Ask your employees: What will help you grow and stay challenged in your job? What was the most exciting and challenging experience you had in the past year? What new things did you learn? What new things would you like to learn next year? It is normal for most employees to feel some boredom after a few years on a job. Most employees fight boredom by discovering new ways of remaining interested in their jobs, but others need some help. The above questions will help you keep them invested in their job before they start to lose energy and drive and begin looking elsewhere for excitement.

■ Q. I recently suggested an employee use your service. I've heard all kinds of things that are going on, from his spouse and even his landlord, but didn't think I should mention that to the EA Specialist, since it was hearsay. He's missing work, coming in late and falling behind. That's all I mentioned. Was that right?

A. When you make a referral, it's important for the specialist to know what may be impacting the employee's performance problems. You can certainly encourage the employee to discuss personal issues that would not be addressed at work, in the confidential setting of an EAS office. Information about specific job performance problems is clearly needed, but information about other issues that could be distracting your employee may be as important. The EA Specialist can tactfully draw out these issues when made aware. The employee may be embarrassed or ashamed to mention issues if not encouraged to do so. Talk to your EA Specialist about your concerns. They are there to help you, too.

NOTES:

Visit EAS on our website at:
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